



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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November 4, 2009

The Honorable M. Jodi Rell
Governor of Connecticut
State Capitol
Hartford, CT 06106

RE: Improved Estimates of Preserved Land in Connecticut

Dear Governor Rell:

I am writing to inform you of some interesting and very encouraging findings regarding the extent of preserved land in Connecticut. It appears that previous estimates of open space acreage preserved by municipalities and nonprofit organizations have been low – probably by tens of thousands of acres. I would like to explain how the Council arrived at this conclusion and some positive implications for the future of land conservation.

In October, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) released results of its ongoing Protected Open Space Mapping (POSM) project for about 75 cities and towns. Though incomplete, this is Connecticut's first thorough inventory of protected open space. Comparing the POSM data to the "pre-POSM" estimates, one can see that the open space preserved by municipalities and nonprofits is much more extensive than previous estimates reported by the DEP. The very active town of Canton, for example, has more than 1,500 acres of open space, but only about 600 acres were in the state's records prior to POSM.

The reasons for the discrepancy are that previous estimates were made without benefit of a thorough inventory, and there has never been a system by which towns and land trusts could report their acquisitions. Only those land acquisitions supported by state grants were added to the state's data base. Meanwhile, municipalities and nonprofits have been hard at work setting aside acres by the thousands.

It was very encouraging to learn that Connecticut's citizens have preserved more land than we knew about. This unexpected knowledge leads the Council to suggest some immediate steps to take advantage of this success and improve land conservation strategy in coming years:

- One agency (probably the DEP) should be asked to create a low-cost, electronic reporting system whereby municipalities and nonprofit organizations would report each new acquisition. In the Council's view, this need not be a

mandate to towns and cities; we are confident that the great majority of local governments and nonprofits will participate eagerly.

- The POSM project should be completed in 2010.
- The new POSM-generated data should be used to drive a new land conservation plan and strategy, as the existing Green Plan now seems antiquated. The new plan and strategy should emphasize how the state will pursue its statutory goal of owning ten percent of Connecticut's land area, with a particular emphasis on protecting land that is contiguous to what is preserved already.

This new strategy could, for example, consider the need to preserve specific types of wildlife habitat, as when the state moved proactively to save important grassland habitat in 2008. With POSM data and on-line natural resource information, planners can answer questions that were beyond reach just a few years ago, such as "What exact type of land is needed?" "Where precisely is this land?" "Where does this wildlife occur?" "Where are the nearby preserved lands that can be pulled together into a wildlife area?" Armed with the answers to these questions, the DEP could move more proactively to preserve Connecticut's most important remaining natural lands, rather than wait for landowners to approach the DEP at random. Again, the grassland acquisition showed the promise of such an approach.

- The situation regarding farmland is analogous and can be corrected simultaneously. The Department of Agriculture keeps exact records of land saved through the state's Purchase of Development Rights. However, many towns and nonprofits have preserved farmland without state assistance – a trend that might be expanding even under current economic conditions – and those acquisitions of land or easements are not known to the state.

If there is any way in which the Council can assist your office or other agencies in pursuing these suggestions, we would be pleased to so.

Sincerely,



Barbara C. Wagner
Chair

CC: Amey Marrella, Commissioner of Environmental Protection
F. Philip Prelli, Commissioner of Agriculture
W. David LeVasseur, Undersecretary, Office of Policy and Management